

AT THE THEATRE



Ralph Meeker and Janice Rule in a scene from "Picnic"

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Having one good play to his credit, William Inge now has another, "Picnic," put on at the Music Box last evening. And memorable though "Come Back, Little Sheba" was three seasons ago, "Picnic" is a notable improvement. Taking a group of commonplace people in a small Kansas town on a hot Labor Day just before school opens, Mr. Inge has made a rich and fundamental play out of them that is tremendously moving in the last act. In the first act they look commonplace, but they are people of strength and valor by the time Mr. Inge has finished dramatizing them.

Everything is drowsily casual when the curtain goes up on a sun-baked yard shared by two families that have no men in them. Mrs. Owens, the neighbor on the left, has two growing daughters and she hopes to marry the prettiest of them to the richest boy in town. But a braggart vagrant with a huge, lanky body strolls into the yard, and Mr. Inge's play begins to come into focus. All the women begin to take a new lease on life.

Since Mr. Inge can write comedy as well as drama, the first stirrings among the girls and women are amusing. But "Picnic" is a deadly serious play. Before it is over, the vagrant with the loud mouth and the unsavory past has altered the whole landscape. Whatever was unreal in the first scene is brutally real in the last act. Forces get loose that no one will ever again put under control.

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Mr. Inge knows his characters so well that you cannot distinguish them from the drama. Everything seems to progress under its own momentum once the characters are defined and the situation created. For Mr. Inge seems to have no personal point of view, but only a knowledge of people and an instinct for the truth of the world they live in. Given a wayward brute who has a certain sincerity of his own, and a flimsy world of lazy illusions blows apart. The women who are first amused and then titillated look around them in astonishment and terror at the end. Beautiful as the writing is, the

The Cast

PICNIC, a play in three acts, by William Inge. Staged by Joshua Logan; scenery and lighting by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Mildred Trebor; presented by the Theatre Guild and Mr. Logan, At the Music Box.

Helen Potts	Ruth McDevitt
Hal Carter	Ralph Meeker
Millie Owens	Kim Stanley
Bomber	Morris Miller
Madge Owens	Janice Rule
Flo Owens	Peggy Conklin
Rosemary Sidney	Eileen Heckart
Alan Seymour	Paul Newman
Irma Kronkite	Reta Shaw
Christine Schoenwelder	Elizabeth Wilson
Howard Bevans	Arthur O'Connell

direction and acting are beautiful also. Although Joshua Logan has staged more spectacular performances, he has never staged one so fine. Working like an associated artist he has helped sketch the environment with grace and good humor. When the mood gets serious he stages the climax powerfully without losing the sunny mood of the opening scenes. Jo Mielziner in his most imaginative form has designed a shabby, heat-drenched small town yard that has an artistic vitality of its own.

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The acting is superb. As the cheap braggart, Ralph Meeker acts from the inside out, never forgetting that the character has a validity of its own. Janice Rule gives a lovely performance as the beautiful maiden whose mind is unclear but whose instincts are sound and courageous. As a tom-boy with brains and artistic gifts, Kim Stanley gives a penetrating performance that conveys the distinction as well as the gaucheries of a disarming young lady.

Peggy Conklin as an anxious mother, Eileen Heckart as a school teacher with a hunger for life and a knack for getting it. Paul Newman as a college lad infatuated with a pretty face, Ruth McDevitt as a wistful neighbor, Arthur O'Connell as a comically reluctant bridegroom—help to bring to life all the cross-currents of Mr. Inge's sensitive writing.

The promise of "Come Back, Little Sheba" is abundantly fulfilled. "Picnic" is an original, honest play with an awareness of people. Most of the characters in "Picnic" do not know what is happening to them. But Mr. Inge does, for he is an artist.